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Geography in The Netherlands

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Geography in The Netherlands

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Geographical thought in Dutch society

- 1 In May 1999, after years of preparation, the EU Council of Ministers approved the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), a non-binding framework for spatial and regional policies at a European scale. The Netherlands had been one of the pioneers of this project. The ESDP had been given a substantial stimulus at the June 1997 conference of EU Ministers in the Dutch seaside resort of Noordwijk, a meeting about the (un)desirability and feasibility of spatial planning at an EU-wide scale. The inputs for the Noordwijk debate had been prepared by the Dutch National Spatial Planning Agency (RPD: *Rijksplanologische Dienst*), a section of the Ministry of Housing, Urban and Regional Planning, and Environmental Policy.
- 2 The country's pioneering role in the ESDP is easy to comprehend in the perspective of the longstanding Dutch tradition in applied geography and urban and regional planning. Between 1960 and 2004, five national spatial planning documents were published by subsequent governments, as respective frameworks for national, regional and local planning and spatial development. Geographical thinking is well embedded in Dutch society and politics. The reasons for this are manifold: the physical-geographical and hydrological conditions; the overwhelming importance of relative location for the national economy; the country's scale, spatial organization and population density; and a political culture that favours state intervention, just to mention a few of the more obvious reasons.
- 3 There is little reason, however, for leaning back in satisfaction about geography's place in Dutch society. The professional role of human geographers, physical geographers and planners increasingly has to be defended against forces of neoliberal policies, short-term thinking, and an ongoing reconstruction of the Dutch welfare state. Geography has a firm position in schools, but "content" quickly loses importance in educational debates. Geographical ignorance is widespread; the cluelessness of broad categories of Dutch

people on holiday about where in the world they are – demonstrated in popular Dutch infotainment shows on television – may be completely harmless, but it shows a deeper trend of increasing superficiality in geographical (and global) awareness. Academic geography programmes have to cope with decreasing student numbers. The threats and challenges are numerous.

- 4 In this contribution, we shall try to summarize the state of affairs in Dutch geography and some of the historical roots of, and trends and changes in the discipline. Section 2 discusses the actual position of geography in the educational system. Historical detail is given in sections 3 (colonial roots of Dutch geography) and 4 (development of school geography). Section 5 is about geography's role in Dutch society, especially with regard to "spatial policy" in The Netherlands. The approach will be sketchy and necessarily incomplete. But we hope that some of the main trends in Dutch geography will become clear to the reader.

Geography in the educational system : the current situation

- 5 Geography is a well-established subject in Dutch schools and universities. For Dutch children geographical education will start at primary school. Although primary schools have the freedom to offer "orientation to society" in an integrated way, the vast majority of them will use separate textbooks and dedicated classroom hours for geography. Primary geography is generally offered in the three (to four) highest grades, for learners in the 9 to 12 age range. Curriculum guidelines for primary geography suggest that children should be given an orientation to global diversity, in landscapes, ways of living, etc., but unfortunately too many teachers focus on *topo*, the root-learning of place names for Dutch and European countries and other continents.
- 6 In all schools at the lower secondary level (age 12 to 14/15), geography is a mandatory subject as well. In the subsequent phase that prepares for examinations, the situation becomes more complex. Vocational schools (exams at age 16) have only one "stream" in which geography is an important optional subject. Schools that prepare for higher education offer geography as an integral part of one of the four so-called "profiles": the "profile" called "economics and society", which is basically a subject mix of economics and social sciences (as an addition to the mandatory core subjects for all learners, such as mathematics and languages). In the other three "profiles" (science and technology; science and health; culture and society) geography is only an optional subject. It is estimated that 45-50% of all learners in upper secondary education take up geography.
- 7 Four universities offer bachelor programmes in "human geography and planning": the University of Amsterdam, Utrecht University, the State University of Groningen and the Catholic University of Nijmegen. These universities also offer a range of master programmes; most of them are one-year professional master programmes, some are two-year research master programmes that prepare for a subsequent (three-year) PhD trajectory. Master programmes may be monodisciplinary courses such as urban geography or economic geography, or joint ventures with other disciplines such as international development studies or real estate studies. Physical geography is a major component of (and area of specialisation in) the bachelor programmes in earth sciences at three universities: in Amsterdam (University of Amsterdam and the protestant Free

University) and in Utrecht. Physical geography is also well represented among the master programmes in these universities. The two other universities that also offer earth sciences, but without a strong tradition in physical geography, are Wageningen University (programme: soil, water & atmosphere) and Delft Technical University (programme: technical earth sciences, including geodesy).

- 8 Only in Utrecht human geography and physical geography are institutionally embedded in the same Faculty - the Faculty of Geosciences - that covers a range of disciplines, from geophysics to environmental sciences. Other universities offer only one branch of geography or have the two geographies in separate Faculties (Amsterdam).
- 9 Although geography may be considered to be a well-established subject in the educational system, its relative position as an independent subject has become gradually weaker during the last decades, as the following brief account of its recent history will demonstrate.
- 10 Geography's position in the academic world improved greatly during the 1950s and 1960s. The number of universities that offered programmes in geography increased from two (University of Amsterdam and State University Utrecht, see next section) to five (Groningen, 1950; Nijmegen, 1958; Free University in Amsterdam, 1961). Due to cuts in the national budget for higher education, the human geography department of the Free University had to close its doors in 1984 (physical geography survived). Apart from these regular geography departments, some universities had "Institutes for Economic Geography" linked to their degree programmes in economics. These institutes had been created because of the fact that since 1921 economic geography had been a mandatory subject in economics degree courses. For this reason, universities without a "normal" geography department - such as the Erasmus University in Rotterdam - might have such an institute for economic geography only. None of these special institutes has survived until today, however. The requirement for students in economics to take courses in geography no longer exists.
- 11 Geography's expansion during the fifties and sixties had two reasons: the demand for academically-trained geography teachers in (upper) secondary schools and the emerging new market for applied geographers (also see section 5). From the 1970s onwards, however, academic geography's links to school geography (as a labour market) gradually became weaker. More and more graduates found jobs in the expanding field of applied geography and planning, both in the (semi-)public and in the private sector. In the Dutch dual system of higher education (university system and professional higher education system), the task of training teachers was largely taken over by professional schools, that started the so-called "New Teacher Training Colleges" in the mid-seventies. Today, some eight of these professional schools offer teacher training in geography (although a university degree is still required for teaching geography in the highest grades of secondary schools).
- 12 Academic departments in (human or physical) geography combine teaching and research. Research is no longer a matter of individual preference, but a team activity within (local) research institutes and/or (inter)national research schools. Research has become something professionalized, institutionalised, controlled (by inspection teams) and increasingly multidisciplinary. The PhD is now an entry requirement for any permanent position for academic staff. Many of these PhDs were published in the series *Netherlands Geographical Studies* (*Nederlandse Geografische Studies*), co-edited by the Royal Dutch

Geographical Society (KNAG). Until now, more than 300 books in this series have been published.

- 13 Approximately 300 freshmen enrol in academic human geography programmes every year (100 students for physical geography, as part of a larger number starting earth sciences). Their number has been gradually decreasing over the years. Active marketing is required for maintaining the influx of students at an acceptable level.
- 14 All road signs indicate that we will move in a direction of fundamental re-ordering and reclassification of academic fields and labels in the decades to come. Geographers are increasingly involved in cross-disciplinary research. Multi-faceted themes such as housing, immigration, innovation, climate change, river management, sustainable development and the like, dominate the research agenda and direct the money flows for research. Independent “geography departments” no longer exist in universities: geography is embedded in broader (social) science clusters. Only in Groningen, the Faculty name “Geographical Sciences” (*Ruimtelijke Wetenschappen*) still exists. The new bachelor-master system has speeded up the transformation of academic programmes towards broader and more general initial (bachelor) programmes and specialised, often interdisciplinary advanced (master) programmes. International student mobility has increased the disciplinary diversity of the participants in many classrooms.
- 15 The trend towards a reframing of labels is also evident in schools. New legislation that is now in the making will allow schools to choose whatever labels they prefer as umbrellas for the curriculum guidelines and standards set by the government. This is the case for primary schools, for the lower grades of secondary schools and in the more remote future probably for upper secondary grades as well. The traditional disciplinary model – with school subjects such as geography, history, political education (*maatschappijleer*), biology, etc. – will survive for some time to come due to its social reproduction. But the long-term trend is certainly towards a re-ordering of domains, both in schools and in universities.

Colonial roots of Dutch geography

- 16 The historical roots of academic geography in The Netherlands are intimately linked to Dutch colonialism and to the demand for geography teachers in schools. In this section, we shall discuss the colonial dimension; the historical links between academic geography and school geography are the subject of the next section.
- 17 One evening in March 1873, a group of “amateur-geographers” met in the Diligentia Club in Amsterdam. There and then they founded a Geographical Society, as was done in many other European countries in those decades. Since 1888, this society has been known as the Royal Dutch Geographical Society (KNAG: *Koninklijk Nederlands Aardrijkskundig Genootschap*), after “Dutch” was added in 1883 and the predicate “Royal” was granted in 1888.
- 18 The KNAG was initially not an academic society, but rather a group of distinguished members of the army, trading companies, the shipping sector, the industrial world and government. Their main aim was the collection and development of practical knowledge about far-away places and peoples, in particular the Dutch colonies. Such knowledge was seen as instrumental for the enhancement of Dutch wealth and power. At the founding meeting in 1873, the initiators decided that “even the appearance of a learned society should be avoided”. The initial goals are also made clear by the society’s motto imprinted on the medals that were presented later on for special merits: “Trade follows science”.

The Royal Dutch Geographical Society (co-)organised many expeditions, especially to the Dutch Indies and to Surinam. The first one, for example, was an expedition to the then unexplored interior of Sumatra (1877-1879). The Dutch commercial elite had provided the money for this trip, hoping to find – if not gold – at least coal and fertile soils for plantations.

- 19 One of the most active fundraisers for the Sumatra expedition was C.M. Kan (1837-1919), who was also the secretary of the Society. Together with the KNAG chairman P.J. Veth (1814-1895 ; a professor in Leiden for “studies of the Dutch Indies”), he actively lobbied for the creation of a Chair in Geography at the University of Amsterdam. Typically, they stressed the socio-economic (colonial) importance of geography :

“Nowhere will a professor in geography be better placed than in Amsterdam, the first trading city in the Netherlands, in earlier times the point of departure of many a traveller and explorer who have distinguished themselves in the field of geography, where even today the relations with other countries and especially with other continents are greater than anywhere else in our fatherland.” (Veth & Kan, 1877, p. 369)

- 20 The lobby campaign proved to be successful. In 1877, the City Council of Amsterdam decided to establish a Chair in Geography at its university, the University of Amsterdam. The first professor was the KNAG lobbyist himself : C.M. Kan. Until his retirement in 1907, his main task was teaching geography to primary school teachers, who wanted to qualify for a job as geography teacher in a secondary school. Kan had hardly any fulltime students ; only a few students, with a major in disciplines such as physics or history, took geography as a minor, again with the intention of becoming qualified as a secondary geography teacher. Kan successors, S.R. Steinmetz (1862-1940 ; human geography) and E. Dubois (1858-1940 ; physical geography), initially worked under similar conditions. The situation changed in 1921, when human geography and physical geography gained the status of separate and independent degree programmes in The Netherlands. These programmes were offered both at the University of Amsterdam and at the State University of Utrecht. Geography – as a minor and again especially for the training of teachers – had made its entrance in Utrecht in 1908 (for further details, see De Pater, 2001).
- 21 The links between geography and colonialism remained intact until the independence of the Dutch Indies in 1949, although the ties had gradually become looser. KNAG organised its final colonial excursion in 1959, to New Guinea, the last remaining colony in The East. New Guinea became part of Indonesia in 1962 ; the phase of colonial expeditions had ended after eighty years. Colonial geography was transformed into “geography of the developing world”, now a vital specialisation with numerous graduates who work in the field of development cooperation.

The development of school geography

- 22 Already in the 18th century, many schools in the loosely-structured Dutch educational system used geography textbooks. But public interest in geographical knowledge was limited. This changed rapidly during the second half of the 18th century, when more information became available about peoples and places around the world, more people became fascinated by the exploration of formerly “unexplored territories”, and geography came to be considered as having “cultural importance” (Van Westrhenen,

1976). It would take almost another century, until the 1850s and 1860s, before geography gained the status of a mandatory school subject. By then, geography was also seen as “economically useful” for the middle classes and elites in the Dutch (colonial) state. Another reason was geography’s perceived contribution to creating a national identity.

- 23 A national law of 1806 made primary education obligatory for all Dutch children. For “the people” (the working class) four to six years of primary school was all formal education that the state offered. The working class was supposed to learn “reasonable and moral behaviour”, basic reading and calculation skills, plus “some elementary principles of knowledge and civilization”. Geography teaching was supposed to contribute to this last goal ; in 1857 it became a mandatory primary school subject.
- 24 Children of the Dutch elites visited Latin Schools or French Schools. The Latin Schools were the first step towards higher education ; French schools – generally of a rather poor quality – prepared for jobs in trade, business or the civil service. Geographical education in Latin Schools was “old geography” : geography of the Classical World, supporting the study of history and classical languages. Geography in most French schools was basically rather unsystematic and highly encyclopaedic “world knowledge”. Secondary education for the (growing) middle classes did not exist until 1863, when the liberal Dutch education minister Thorbecke succeeded in passing a law for the creation of the *Hogere Burgerschool* (Higher School for Citizens ; secondary education for children of the middle classes) (Bolkestein, 1914). One of the State Education Inspectors, Daniël Steyn Parvé (1825-1883), contributed in important ways to the fact that geography gained a solid place in this new secondary school, that also replaced the former French Schools. His point was that geography could play its role in realizing the educational ideal of “broad and useful knowledge”, in a country that started industrializing, with important colonial trade, and a population that was increasingly mobile and therefore should have a basic understanding of the geography of its own country at least.
- 25 The new system evolved during the 100 years of its existence – Latin Schools became so-called *gymnasia*, these schools became part of the secondary system instead of the higher education system, Thorbecke’s *Burgerschool* and the *gymnasia* came closer together, vocational schools started to complement the system in the early 20th century – but basically Thorbecke’s secondary school system survived until 1968.
- 26 A very important player in the field of geographical education was Pieter Roelof Bos, a geography teacher in Groningen and a successful author of geography textbooks. In his essay about “The place of geography in the system of sciences” (Bos, 1878), strongly inspired by developments in German geography, he defended the position that geography should be seen as a natural science. Detailed study of the natural forms in the world should be at the basis of comparison, classification, and generalization. In geography, “the social” should follow “the physical”. As a teacher, he strongly believed in the importance of maps, maps that should be as empty as possible for the purpose of studying the essential landforms and patterns. He was the initiator and first editor of the very successful *Schoolatlas der Geheele Aarde* (School Atlas of the Earth), now known as the Bos-atlas, the 52nd edition of which is available in every Dutch geography classroom in 2004. Through the use of rather “empty” maps, he wanted to promote geographical thinking in children, and avoid senseless rote-learning of numerous place names. In spite of Bos’ promotion of “learning the essential”, most geography teachers in the late 19th and early 20th century stressed the memorization of endless lists of landforms, soil types and place names. With the growing importance, around the 1920s and 1930s, of economic

geography in universities – where geography teachers and textbook authors were trained – lists of product names started to replace the lists of names of “caples and bays” in schools. In spite of lively discussions in professional journals on what school geography should be about, the dominant practice well into the 1950s remained a very factual type of school geography.

- 27 In the 1960s, a new generation of geography textbooks started to dominate the market : textbooks that favoured systematic geography more than regional geography, and that gave a more important place to various kinds of “exercises” that might help to develop geographical thinking. The younger generation of geography teachers, graduating in the 1960s or 1970s, was more familiar with the “new geography” and with applied geography than with classical regional geography. All this had a major impact on what was going on in geography classrooms. The formal national guidelines suggested a regionally-oriented curriculum, with Europe in grade 1 (age 12/13), other continents in grade 2 (especially the United States, Russia and the developing world) and The Netherlands in grade 3. More and more textbook authors and teachers, however, broke this tradition and introduced a more systematic approach.
- 28 At the turn of the 21st century, school geography had come a long way in pedagogical and educational renewal. School geography aims at “thinking geographically” about the world, about national and international issues, and at a judicious use of information sources (atlas, data, information from the web and other sources) in trying to answer geographical questions. From a subject-matter point of view, however, a similar “jump forward” has as yet not been realized (Van der Vaart, 2001). The themes of school geography sound interesting and topical (multicultural society, coping with shrinking natural resources, active earth, politics and space, etc.), but the actual concepts and ideas that should breathe life into these themes, are generally outdated. The gap between academic geography and school geography has widened dangerously, a phenomenon that has also been observed in the United Kingdom (see for example : Marsden, 1997) and in other countries as well.
- 29 It will be a major challenge in the years to come to bring more testing ideas and concepts into the classroom, not in an imposing way, but as a service to a better understanding for children of the world in which they grow up. At the request of the national education ministry, the Royal Dutch Geographical Society produced, in 2003, a new examination programme for geography in upper secondary schools. Academics and teachers have worked together in this project. The proposal includes concepts such as globalization, ethnicity, “system earth” in order to make sense of the contemporary world. As such, it may be seen as an important step forward.

Geography, the economy and policy making

- 30 Geographers have played a major role in the development of a solid Dutch planning tradition. Applied geographers were always involved in the preparation and design of local, regional and national documents for spatial planning. Dutch geographers may be seen as the “socio-spatial engineers of the welfare state”. Already in the 1930s academic geography courses (only in Amsterdam and Utrecht in those days) paid attention to urban and regional planning : *planologie* (“planology”) in Dutch, a term introduced by De Casseres in 1929. The general opinion was that regional plans and regional socio-economic policies should be preceded by social-geographical or economic-geographical

surveys. “Survey before plan” and “survey – analysis – plan”: these were the slogans, inspired by Patrick Geddes’ work, taught to geography students in Utrecht. Professor Louis van Vuuren (1873-1951) practiced this creed by doing fieldwork with his students in Dutch regions (such as Salland) and cities (Zwolle, for example) that were badly hit by the international economic crisis. The central question in these and similar research projects was always the same: which policy measures should the government (be advised to) take for widening the possibilities for making a living in these regions and cities, and thereby for the reduction of poverty and unemployment?

- 31 In Amsterdam, professor H.N. ter Veen (1883-1949) involved his students in the process of spatial design and colonization of the polder Wieringermeer (reclaimed in 1930 as a state project) and the Noordoostpolder, in what is now known as the IJssel Lake (former *Zuiderzee*). Ter Veen had socialist sympathies and believed in the “power for good” of the State (intentionally written with a capital S by Ter Veen). He was the founder of government-affiliated organizations that carried out practical research on social and socio-spatial issues in the “new land” (the reclaimed polders). One of these organizations was the “Foundation for Population Research in the Reclaimed *Zuiderzee* Polders”, established in 1936. These organizations provided many human geographers, especially from the University of Amsterdam, with a living.
- 32 The involvement of geographers with the spatial policies of the welfare state became even more intense after World War II. Apart from the regular spatial policy instruments for national, regional and local planning, new regional policies were designed aiming at the restructuring of the depressed rural periphery. Today, this policy domain is part of EU-wide agricultural and structural policies, but far into the 1970s rural policies were national; these regional policies increasingly aimed at industrial restructuring as well, in those regions in the South, East and North of the country that suffered from deindustrialization. National spatial planning policies tried to channel some of the growth of the core area, the Randstad, into the peripheries; this spatial redistribution concept was abandoned in the 1980s, however, and facilitation of economic growth in the Randstad itself, perceived as the motor region of the national economy, became the new guiding principle.
- 33 The demand for planners resulted in the establishment of academic degree programmes in *planologie*, urban and regional planning, starting in the 1960s. It is not surprising that the first generation of professors in urban and regional planning consisted of planning experts who themselves had been trained as human geographers. The close links between human geography and planning are also exemplified by the new bachelor programmes of the 21st century: without exceptions, these programmes are labelled as “human geography and planning”; the differentiation of labels only exists at the level of (professional) master programmes (Donkers, 2003).
- 34 About half of the latest generations of graduated human geographers and planners will find a job in the (semi-)public sector; the other half works in the private sector. Private companies that specialize in applied research, consultancy, advisory or training activities, apparently value the intellectual perspective and empirical research skills of academically-trained geographers and planners. Large companies such as banks, investment companies, trading companies and the like, also employ many geographers, for probably the same reasons. The public sector includes the national, regional and local layers of government plus a wide variety of (semi-)public single-purpose organizations in fields such as housing, recreation, economic development, tourism, landscape

preservation, transportation, and so forth. Education absorbs only a very small share – under five percent – of the graduates.

- 35 Physical geographers have a very similar position (see, for example : Leenaers 2003). Academic staff is strongly involved in applied research : for coastal management, river management, or related to environmental issues, ecology, and landscape preservation. Graduates may work in fundamental research (universities, public research institutes) or in public institutions and private companies doing applied research, consultancy work or other policy-related tasks.

Royal Dutch Geographical Society



The Royal Dutch Geographical Society : The spider in the Dutch geographical web

In 2003 the Royal Dutch Geographical Society (KNAG) celebrated its 130th anniversary. One of the festivities was an exhibition on the expeditions the Society participated in during the 1873 – 1960 period. To anyone familiar with the present-day Society, the contrast between the activities then and what the Society stand for now, could not have been bigger.

The Society was established in 1873 to increase the knowledge of the earth. At that time, the map of the world contained many blank spots, i.e. there were numerous locations around the world that were not yet visited by Europeans. On the existing maps, considerable areas were bounded by vague coastlines. Sailors had provided us with knowledge of the forms of the continents and islands, but there was hardly any knowledge of the interior. There was not only a lack of cartographic information, but also of the people living there and the natural resources they had to their disposal.

The Society showed a great interest in these unknown areas. First of all, the aim of the Society's members was to enlarge the scientific knowledge of these places, but they also had an eye on the commercial possibilities these areas bared. Under the device "trade follows science", the Society's members set out to organize and carry out their expeditions with which they brought home new and practical knowledge of the earth.

In total, around forty expeditions have been organized under the auspices of the Society. All the mapping, making inventories and collecting samples has resulted in an impressive heritage. The collected data and objects have been handed over to institutions like the Royal Institute of the Tropics, the State herbarium, the State

museum for zoology, the State museum for cultural anthropology and different University museums, where they still are to be seen today. The expedition reports were published in the Journal of the Society and in numerous separate monographies that have found their way into libraries and collections.

When the need to explore vanished, the Royal Dutch Geographical Society turned its focus to the Dutch geographers and geography in The Netherlands. Today the Society is The Netherlands' professional association of geographers, geography students and geography teachers with 4000 members. The promotion of geography in general, and the improving its position in secondary and higher education in peculiar, are some of the tasks carried out by the Society. It offers a venue for discussion among geographers in a range of professions : research & education, private & public sector, national and international. The Society's focus is not limited to The Netherlands. It is a member of various international geographical networks, such as the IGU, EUROGEO and EUGEO.

The Society is still known as publisher. Its periodicals *Geografie*, a journal in Dutch for geographers who want to keep informed on a broad range of topics ; and the scientific, English-language journal *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* (*Journal of Economic and Social Geography*) find their way to an enthusiastic audience.

More information on the Royal Dutch Geographical society, its current activities, products and membership benefits may be found on the Society's website www.geography.nl



PROF. VAN VUUREN (CENTRE, WITH HAT IN HAND) ON A FIELD TRIP TO THE PROVINCE OF OVERIJSEL IN THE LATE 1930S.



DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, THE DUTCH geography STUDENTS TRIED TO CONTINUE THEIR ACTIVITIES AS NORMAL AS POSSIBLE EVEN AS JEWISH STUDENTS AND TEACHERS WERE EXPELLED. HERE YOU SEE WIM EggINK, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE SOCIETY OF UTRECHT'S SOCIAL GEOGRAPHERS (VUGS), DURING THE FORTH LUSTRUM OF THE VUGS ON 12. NOVEMBER 1942. EggINK BECAME FAMOUS FOR HIS ROLE DURING THE WAR. HE WAS THE LEADER OF THE DUTCH STUDENT'S RESISTANCE AGAINST THE OCCUPATION BY THE GERMANS AND LOST HIS LIFE IN PRISON.

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